

CHRIST IN THE TABERNACLE

by

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CHAPTER TEN

THE GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE

Christ — Our “Advocate with the Father”

Exodus 30:1-10, 34-38; 37:25-28; 40:5, 26, 27; Numbers 4:5, 11, 15, 20

NOWHERE in all the Jewish tabernacle do “**The Glories of Christ**” shine forth with more radiance and beauty than in the golden altar of incense, which stood before the veil in the Holy Place. It was directly in front of the Ark of the Covenant and mercy seat, which stood within the veil in the Holy of Holies, only this beautiful hanging of fine twined linen, embroidered with cherubim of blue, purple, and scarlet, separating it from the Shekinah Glory, which rested in a pillar of cloud and fire above the mercy seat.

On the left of the golden altar of incense the candlestick shed its light upon everything in the Holy Place; while to the right, just opposite the candlestick, stood the table of shewbread. Thus the altar, before which Aaron offered sweet incense to God, as he prayed for the people, became another important link in “the shadow of the cross,” formed by the six pieces of furniture in the Jewish tabernacle and in the outer court.

For the description given by the Holy Spirit concerning the golden altar, we turn to the passages of Scripture listed at the beginning of this lesson.

According to the God-given “**pattern**,” it was made of the same incorruptible acacia wood, from which other articles in the tabernacle were fashioned. This durable wood, ever reminding us of the sinless humanity of our Lord, was covered over with pure gold, which once more speaks to us of His eternal deity; for the golden altar prefigured our Great High Priest and “**Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous**.”

This altar was two cubits high, one cubit long, and one cubit wide. Around its “foursquare” top was “**a crown of gold**.” And at each of the four corners was a “**horn**,” or projection, covered over with gold.

Under the crown, at the four corners, were rings of gold, through which the staves were passed when the altar was to be carried on the march through the wilderness. These staves, like those for the other pieces of furniture, were made of acacia wood, covered over with gold.

Coals taken from the brazen altar in the outer court were placed upon this golden altar; and upon these coals sweet incense was burned “**before the Lord**” morning and evening by Aaron himself. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, some of these burning coals were taken by the high priest, in the golden censer, into the Most Holy Place, where the incense was offered to God.

When the Shekinah Glory lifted from off the tabernacle, indicating God’s will that His people should resume their journey through the wilderness, the priests went into the Holy Place, and covered the golden altar, first with “**a cloth of blue**,” then with “**a covering of badgers’ skins**,” placing the staves through the rings of gold. Then the Kohathites, one of the three families of the Levites, carried it on the march. But these Kohathites were not to “**go in to see when the holy things**” were “**covered, lest they die**” (Numbers 4:20).

Thus we find that much of the symbolism connected with this golden altar was like unto that which had to do with the other articles in the Holy Place — all of which foreshadowed the Person and work of our Lord.

The precious materials of which these sacred things were made speak to us of His matchless Person, as both God and Man; whereas the fact that none could view them save the priests teaches us that only the born again believer-priests can enter by faith, into the Holy Place, even heaven itself, there to behold the One “**altogether lovely**,” as He ministers for His own before “**the throne of grace**.”

- “**The cloth of blue**,” with which the priests covered the golden altar before the Levites could carry it through the wilderness, once more reminds us of the heavenly character of our Lord;
- The “**covering of badgers’ skins**,” of the fact that the world looks upon Him as only a good man.

But underneath these two coverings, hidden from the gaze of men were the incorruptible wood and the precious gold. The priests alone could look upon this holy thing; and only the believer-priests, redeemed children of God, can know Him as the sinless Son of Man, who was ever the eternal Son of God!

With this mental picture of the golden altar in mind, let us look at some of the details concerning the worship and ministry of Aaron as he stood before this place of prayer. That Christ is our Altar and that Christ is our Priest, there can be no doubt. And this we shall see as the Holy Spirit teaches us these precious truths.

THE GOLDEN ALTAR — THE PLACE OF WORSHIP ON THE GROUND OF SACRIFICE

Without the brazen altar with its fire, there could have been no worship at the golden altar of incense. In our study of the brazen altar in the outer court, we saw that brass speaks of judgment upon sin; and that the death of the victim foreshadowed the vicarious sufferings of Jesus, the Lamb of God. Now these two altars were linked together by the command of God.

- Without the fire from off the brazen altar, there could be no burning of the sweet incense.
- Without the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, there could be no Intercessor for us at the **“throne of grace.”**

His priestly work began at the cross — that priestly work which He still continues to do for us as our **“Advocate with the Father.”** This fundamental truth is clearly set forth in the story of the great sin of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons, who took their censers and **“put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord”** (Leviticus 10:1, 2).

The verse immediately preceding this quotation throws a flood of light upon this sin of Aaron’s sons and their consequent punishment. The priests had just begun their ministry. The offerings had been laid upon the brazen altar.

“And the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people. And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces” (Leviticus 9:23, 24).

Immediately after these words we read of the sin of Nadab and Abihu. God had told Moses previously that the fire upon the brazen altar should **“ever be burning,”** that it should **“never go out”** (Leviticus 6:13). God sent the fire; and He commanded His priests to keep it burning. Moreover, fire from that brazen altar was to be placed upon the golden altar in the Holy Place to burn the sweet incense **“before the Lord.”** It was all according to God’s perfect plan — a plan which prefigured the ministry of Jesus, our Great High Priest, in prayer for us only after He had offered Himself upon the altar of Calvary, and had risen in glory.

Just as the fire was ever to be kept burning upon the brazen altar so also there was to be **“perpetual incense”** upon the golden altar.

Listen to the command of God:

“And Aaron shall burn thereon sweet incense every morning: when he dresseth the lamps, he shall burn incense upon it. And when Aaron lighteth the lamps, at even, he shall burn incense upon it, as perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations” (Exodus 30:7, 8).

Throughout the day and throughout the night the smoke of the sweet incense went up before the Lord, filling the sanctuary with its fragrance; and all the while the fire was burning upon the brazen altar; all the while blood was being shed for the sins of God’s people.

Yes; the two altars were linked together by the express command of God.

- On the cross our Lord paid the penalty for our sins; at the golden altar in heaven He ever lives to intercede.

- At Calvary He bought us with His own precious blood; at the throne of God He keeps us from falling, maintains our fellowship and communion with Him.

When we put our faith in His shed blood, we were **“accepted”** in Him; as we keep **“looking unto Jesus,”** we see Him seated at **“the right hand of the Majesty on high,”** praying for us.

- At the cross we see Him crowned with thorns; at the right hand of the Father we see Him **“crowned with glory and honour.”**

- On Golgotha’s hill we see only blood and ashes, as it were; at the golden altar in heaven we see the eternal God, who is **“the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”** (Revelation 13:8).

And although He bears the marks of Calvary; yet He is the Light of heaven — no longer the suffering Saviour, but the triumphant Lord and King. His shed blood makes His prayers avail before His righteous Father; and our faith in His shed blood makes our prayers avail before the **“throne of grace.”**

To attempt to pray to God, apart from faith in the cross of Jesus, is to offer **“strange fire,”** as it were, upon the golden altar.

- The pagan prays, but to a false god;
- The Mohammedan prays, but to a man;
- The Buddhist prays, but to yet another man;
- The rationalist prays, but not in the name of the Lord Jesus.

God has promised to answer only the prayers of those who go to Him in the all-prevailing name of *“the Lamb of Calvary.”* Make no mistake about it, my friend.

“There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

“He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him [note well the words, **‘by him’**], **seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them”** (Hebrews 7:25).

“Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Romans 8:34).

Not only was the fire from the brazen altar to be used to burn incense; but once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Aaron was also to take the blood from the altar of burnt offering, and put it on the horns of the golden altar. That was the high day of the year. It was the only day when Aaron could enter the Most Holy Place to sprinkle the blood on and before the mercy seat.

And even as he sprinkled the blood, he also took in his hand the golden censer, with its fire, and with sweet incense in his hand to burn it there, **“lest he die.”**

Having shed the blood of the innocent victim, he — a living priest — sprinkled the blood and burned the incense before the Shekinah Glory.

Our Lord Jesus shed His precious blood “**once for all.**” On the morning of His resurrection, as the ever-living Priest, He ascended into heaven to present His atoning blood before His righteous Father — within the veil! (See John 20:17). In His resurrection He is our unchanging Priest, presenting our prayers to the Father, praying for us Himself. Because He Himself bore “**our sins in his own body on the tree,**” He has the right to plead our cause in the court of heaven, because “**he hath appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.**”

He has every right “**now to appear in the presence of God for us**” (Hebrews 9:26, 24). Did not the prophets foretell the “**sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow**”? (See I Peter 1:11). No wonder the hosts of heaven bow down before Him, saying,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing”! (Revelation 5:12).

THE INCENSE — A SYMBOL OF PRAYER

That the incense was a symbol of prayer is clearly seen from Scripture:

“Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands, as the evening sacrifice” (Psalm 141:2).

“The four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours [i. e., ‘incense’], which are the prayers of saints” (Revelation 5:8).

“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne” (Revelation 8:3).

“By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Hebrews 13:15).

From Luke 1:8-10 it seems clear that the time of the burning of incense was the time of prayer. Zacharias was a priest; and as he ministered before the golden altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to him to tell him that he and Elizabeth were to be the parents of John, whom we know as John the Baptist.

“And it came to pass, that while he executed the priests office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.”

Certain it is that God delights to have His people pray to Him. Every devout Christian is familiar with many New Testament passages which bid us pray, and with many verses which link prayer with praise. We quote just two here:

“I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands” (I Timothy 2:8).

“Be careful [i. e., ‘anxious’] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6, 7).

As the sweet incense that went up **“before the Lord”** was fragrant unto Him, even so the prayers and praise of His saints are sweet to His ear. Accepted and answered on the basis of the atoning work of our Great High Priest, they become a vital part of our worship.

“Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!” (Psalm 107:8).

THE ANGEL BEFORE THE GOLDEN ALTAR IN HEAVEN IS CHRIST — OUR INTERCESSOR BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD

A few moments ago, in giving Scripture to show that incense is a symbol of prayer, we quoted Revelation 8:3, where an angel in heaven is seen with **“much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.”**

We read on, and in the following verse we note these added words,

“And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand” (Revelation 8:4).

The Angel here is none other than our Lord Jesus, the Great High Priest, presenting the prayers of His saints to the Father, prayers made acceptable on the basis of faith in His shed blood. The **“much incense”** of verse three can be nothing other than Christ’s own intercession; and it is offered **“with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar”** before the throne. He himself added to the prayers of all saints by His own merit.

It was only Aaron who offered the sweet incense; and he was a type of Christ, our ministering Priest. The sanctuary in the wilderness was the appointed place of worship; and to heaven itself we go in prayer and praise, through the merit of our Great High Priest. There was a thick veil between Aaron and the Shekinah Glory as he stood before the altar of incense; but there is no veil between our Lord and us, as we meet Him at **“the throne of grace.”** At any time, anywhere, as we work or rest or play, we enter into His presence instantly, by faith, through prayer — possibly for a fleeting moment in the hustle and bustle of the day, possibly for an hour alone with Him **“in the secret place.”** We need no earthly priest to represent us before the golden altar in heaven; for the veil of the temple has been rent in twain, **“the way into the holiest”** forever opened through **“his flesh,”** which was bruised for our sins. And because He suffered, He is our sympathetic Saviour! Because He is God, He is our all-powerful Lord!

“For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

“And his name shall be called . . . The mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6).

On earth He was hungry and weary; despised and rejected; betrayed and forsaken; mocked and crucified. He knows the agony of suffering such as we can never understand. And He knows when we are troubled and perplexed and tested and tried. “He knows; He loves; He cares!”

Not only so; but He is the Omnipotent God, **“the same yesterday, and today, and for ever”** (Hebrews 13:8). He is our ever-living, unchanging Priest before the golden altar which is in heaven! Then why do we worry? Why do we fear? We do not honor Him through worry and fear.

Let us, rather, listen to His reassuring words, **“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”** (John 14:27).

“Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? . . . It is I myself” (Luke 24:38, 39).

- When the storms come, He is with us in the ship.
- When death enters the home, He, the Resurrection and the Life, is with us.
- Even as He said to Israel of old, He is saying to us today, **“Fear not: for I have redeemed thee . . . Fear not: for I am with thee”** (Isaiah 43:1, 5).

Dear, troubled Christian, would you like to know what prayer He utters even now before **“the throne of grace”** for you? Then read the seventeenth chapter of John.

Hear Him ask the Father:

- To keep you from the evil one,
- To cleanse you through His Word,
- To give you His own joy,
- To make you a soul winner — **“that the world may believe”** that the Father sent His Son to die;
- To give you the exalted position of union with Him,
- To receive you unto Himself, to **“behold”**
- To share His glory which He had with the Father **“before the world was”**!

That is our Lord’s High Priestly prayer; and that is the kind of prayer He ever prays on our behalf.

- When we go astray, He prays for us, and brings us near to Himself.
- When we need encouragement and strength, He gives it by His Holy Spirit.

Let us spend more and more time with Him and with His Word; and we shall become ever-increasingly conscious of His abiding Presence, and of His prevailing prayer for us before our Father in heaven. What more could we want in respect to eternal security?

“We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”! (I John 2:1).

As another has expressed it, He may give us the desires of our hearts immediately. He may say, “No,” to us, because He has something better to give. Or He may say, “Wait a while — wait till you are strengthened and tested; wait till the dross is consumed, even as gold is refined by fire.” But whatever His answer, whatever He sends, whether earthly joys or **“a thorn in the flesh,”** He is getting us ready for service now and for heaven throughout eternity. Shall we not trust Him — utterly?

THE INCENSE — A TYPE OF THE FRAGRANT LIFE OF THE SON OF GOD BEFORE THE FATHER

“NO strange incense” was allowed on the golden altar that stood before the veil in the Holy Place (Exodus 30:9). The holy incense was made according to the God-given instructions. None of it was to be used for any other purpose, lest the man who disobeyed this command be **“cut off from his people”** (Exodus 30:38). The penalty was death. The incense was holy, **“unto the Lord.”** Three sweet spices and frankincense went into the making of this holy incense, **“a perfume . . . tempered together, pure and holy.”** It was to be beaten **“very small,”** then put upon the fire on the golden altar. (See Exodus 30:34-38).

Because this was **“perpetual incense,”** offered morning and evening, the sanctuary was ever filled with the fragrant smoke, the sweet perfume that arose from the golden altar. Nor was its sweetness known to the priests until the fires burned it upon the altar.

What a picture of our Lord’s fragrant life, tested by the fires of suffering, which only served to show forth His excellencies! The fragrance of His sinless life, His gracious words, His loving deeds went up before His Father in heaven, a **“perpetual”** delight. Scourged and “beaten,” tried by the very fires of anguish and sorrow, yet His beauties and perfections were revealed before men, angels, and demons. And the Father in heaven was **“well pleased”** in His Son!

As we find our delight in the sweet incense of our Lord’s fragrant life, in His **“altogether lovely”** Person — this is worship. And such worship is not to be imitated. For it there is no substitute. No outward ceremonies, however beautiful to the natural man; no burning of candles, no prayers to angels or virgin or saint can be called true worship. No outward fervor nor emotional excitement in the name of Christianity can be worship in the scriptural sense. Only as we meditate upon Christ, thank Him for His “great salvation,” praise Him for His matchless Person — only this can be called worship that honors God. It is the Lamb who is **“worthy,”** and He alone!

NO VEIL BETWEEN “MY SOUL AND THE SAVIOUR!”

Now that the veil of the temple has been rent in twain; now that the earthly priesthood has been done away; now that there is “**nothing between**” our souls and the Saviour,

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

“Let us draw near . . .” (Hebrews 10:22).

Prayer brings us into the closest possible communion with our Father in heaven. Christ Himself is our Golden Altar; He is our Priest! We have nothing to fear. “He sweetens our prayers with the frankincense” of His fragrant life. And “He never gets done thinking about us!”

“How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee” (Psalm 139:17, 18).

Satan will put doubts and fears in our way. He will seek to mar our testimony, and rob us of our joy in the Lord. But Satan “**desired . . . Peter,**” that he might “**sift**” him “**as wheat.**”

Peter’s Lord knew all this, before it came to pass; and knowing it, He said to Peter, “**I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not**” (Luke 22:31, 32). Peter’s Lord is our Lord and our God. He knows our weakness, even before we stumble; and He is praying for us, ever living to be our “**Advocate with the Father.**”

What more could we ask? Till Jesus comes to take us home to heaven, forever to be with Himself, He will continue to intercede for us. As we thank Him for His grace, we worship Him, in the words of the Apostle Paul, written many centuries ago,

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! . . . Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).

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